

AN ANALYSIS OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN EMAILS OF INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is motivated by the premise that little is known about the use of politeness strategies in emails in Indonesian English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) context. Thus, this study aims to analyze the politeness strategies in emails of Indonesian EFL learners. The descriptive qualitative design was employed using documentation, analysis as the research instruments. The findings showed that students tended to act on record with politeness strategies in delivering their assignment for their lecturer. They also showed that positive politeness was the dominant strategies. Meanwhile, in conclusion, many aspects can affect the student's politeness, the most factors are stated in Brown and Levinson's theory; distance, power, and rank of imposition.

KEYWORDS: *Politeness, Politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson's theory, Emails & Indonesian EFL learner*

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence is roughly divided into two components: pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. According to Leech (1983), pragmatics are composed of pragmalinguistics (the more linguistic end of pragmatics) and socio-pragmatics (the sociological interface of pragmatics). Therefore, pragmalinguistic competence refers to the speakers' ability to infer the communicative intention of purpose of an utterance beyond the most literal meaning. On the other hand, social-pragmatic competence refers to speakers' knowledge of adapting speech act strategies to the situational or socio-cultural variables in a communicative event. Pragmatic competence guides 'the theoretical direction of the measurement of interlanguage pragmatics' (Yamashita, 2008: 202). In order to communicate appropriately in a target language, learners need to develop their pragmatic competence in the second/ foreign language. Therefore, an investigation, which focuses on the pragmatic competence of the Indonesian learners, especially of the university students who have passed the compulsory English tests for their degree certificate, is imperative in the current study.

Politeness were first studied at the level of words and sentences; however, after advances in the fields of conversation analysis and pragmatics, it came to be examined at the discourse level (Lakoff, 2005) (in Tajeddin, Z., & Pezeshki, M., 2014). It is a topic on which people have very different opinions (and "people," in this case, includes linguistic scholars and researchers) Different theories were proposed for politeness as early as the 1980s by politeness researchers (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987). Many studies which are conducted by using Brown and Levinson's theory as a grand theory of politeness, as far as I know, they became the father of politeness.

Moreover, politeness assume that we all have faced, and we all have face wants and needs. It means that people in all cultures have an awareness of self-image as they communicate. Protecting face is important for communicating and behaving successfully with others, even though it may not be accomplished consciously by talk participants. In addition, Leech (2014) stated, “politeness is a form of communicative behavior found very generally in human languages and among human cultures; indeed, it has been claimed as a universal phenomenon of human society”. From that sentence, it can be concluded that to be polite is to speak or behave in such a way as to give benefit or value not to you, but to the other person(s), especially the person(s) you are conversing with.

Another motivation for this study is that electronic mail (email) has become a very important medium for both interpersonal and institutional communications, particularly in academic and business institutions due to its high transmission speed and less intrusive nature than traditional letters (Crystal, 2001). Moreover, at universities and colleges, email assumes more functions besides communication, including the delivery of materials as well as course management (Worrels, 2002). However, as Baron (2000) and Murray (1995) pointed out, people may feel it hard to write emails to those perceived as higher in status in the workplace because such asymmetrical- power emails are complicated with various faces-threatening acts. According to this situation, it is imaginable that non-native speakers may feel it even harder to compose status-unequal emails, which demand that writers have sufficient pragmatic competence, high linguistic ability, and familiarity with the norms and values of the target culture.

In recent times, technological advancements along with the Internet have promptly boosted the use of email as a regular social communication tool and have introduced it in many workplaces. All employees generally have access to this medium, but not without consequences, as it has greatly affected the social affairs among those involved (Markus, 1994). In the new modern era we live in, Computer-mediated communication (CMC) comprises a basic underpinning (or software) that each and every corporation must be equipped with (Ean, 2010). Strictly speaking, it has totally transformed workplace communication and has altered the manner and style of human interaction at work.

In the last few decades, few studies on the email requests produced by mainland Chinese English learners have been conducted. To fill the research gap, this study attempts to explore politeness strategy using Brown and Levinson’s theory of Indonesian EFL learners in writing emails to the lecturer.

Research Questions

The research questions are: (a) do students’ emails to lecturer in Indonesian EFL context promote more positive or negative politeness? And (b) what kind of politeness strategies are used by Indonesian EFL learners regarding Brown & Levinson’s theory?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness

Eight Characteristics of Politeness (Leech, 2014)

- Politeness is not obligatory

Politeness is an option but it is generally thought of as a good thing. People normally being polite for a reason. Therefore, if they do not have a reason to be polite, they can be impolite and rude.

- There are varying gradations of polite and impolite behavior

As an illustration, the deeper the bow, the more polite it is supposed to be and the louder and the more prolonged the clapping are, the greater the appreciation indicated.

- There is often a *sense of what is normal*

It means that there is a particular way of politeness in a certain society which is recognized by the society as normal.

- Politeness will occur depending on the situation

There is a ritualized event where the politeness in a certain case will be different compared to other cases.

- There is a reciprocal asymmetry between two parties

It refers to giving high value to someone and low value to himself. The opposite of this will be considered impolite.

- It can manifest itself in repetitive behavior, which is to lessen a greater degree ritualized

An individual would likely to repeat a certain behavior until he thinks that others has already felt enough (bottle of politeness).

- It involves the passing of some kinds of the transaction of value between the speaker and interlocutor.

For example, thanking someone for something, make a request for something, Something refers to something of value (materials or abstract).

- Its tendency to preserve a balance between the speaker and the interlocutor

One of the participants wants to pay a sense of debt for the kindness of the partner of talk (reciprocity).

Some Distinction to Bear in Mind (Leech, 2014)

- Trivalent Vs bivalent politeness

Establishing and maintaining good relations (rapport) between members of society

Trivalent Politeness: Involves three dimensions: vertical, horizontal and weightiness of the transactions (cost-benefit). It may include in-group and out-group member and strength of obligation P (power), D (distance) and R (rank of imposition),.

Bivalent Politeness: Basically based on two sociopragmatic dimensions: horizontal and vertical.

- Vertical distance = 'power and distance' = the lowest power or status relative to the highest power
- Horizontal distance 'power and solidarity' = the most intimate or familiar relationship to the most distant

Transactional politeness, in the Asian it is called honorifications (deference) e.g. age. It is to show respect to the addressee or a third party. E.g. honorific terms of address (vocative) sir, madam, mbak, mas, akang, teeth, etc.

Pos-Politeness Vs Neg- Politeness**Table 1**

	Pos-Politeness	Neg- Politeness
Definition	give some positive value to the addressee	- as mitigation, reduce or lessen possible cause of offense. It typically involves indirectness, hedging, understatement
Degree of strength or intensity	to increase the degree of politeness, magnify or strengthen the expression of (positive) value.	to increase the degree of politeness, diminish and soften the expression of negative value in the transaction
Scales	Thanks → thanks a lot → thank you very much → thank you very much indeed	Lend me your pen → could you lend me your pen? → I wonder you would be kind enough as to lend me your pen
Example	invitations, compliments, and congratulations, thank-yous and apologies.	polite request
The failure will cause	not really cause a big consequence.	leave other person with a sense of grievance and can lead to social disharmony.
Similarity	The more the speech act is intensified, the longer the words. However, that is just a tendency not a rule because in the other case, the longer utterance might seem more impolite as “How many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?”	

Pragmalinguistics Vs Sociolinguistics**Table 2**

	Pragmalinguistics	Sociolinguistics
Definition	How politeness is conveyed linguistically (lexico-grammatical resources of the language)	Politeness as socially oriented (which is various scale or value [horizontal distance, vertical distance, and weightiness of the transactions] that make a particular degree of politeness seem appropriate or normal in social situation)
Example	English speakers frequently make use of questions, modal auxiliaries, and hypothetical past tense forms of the verb in expressing polite request “Could you write it down for me?”	In English place more weight in the autonomy of individual meanwhile in many other cultures placed the value of generosity
	Contrastive pragmalinguistics (compare languages)	Cross-cultural pragmatics (compare cultures)

Pragmalinguistics Vs Sociopragmatic Politeness**Table 3**

Pragmalinguistics	Sociopragmatics
The meaning of utterance out of context	A matter of judging politeness in context

Addressee Politeness Vs Third-Person Politeness**Table 4**

	Addressee Politeness	Third-Person Politeness
	Directed toward the addressee of the utterance	Target of politeness is not the addressee but some third person(s) who may present during the conversation or absent.
Example	Directly to the addressee	a. Third-person honorifics: b. Proxy request, invitations, thank-yous c. A political apology d. Various kinds of written text
	In-group	Out group
	Me-territory	You-territory

Social Vs Psychological explanations of politeness

- The social explanation of politeness: comity
 - Politeness is a safeguard against the disruptiveness of the society
 - Lakoff (1990:34) politeness is “a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange”
 - Origin of politeness probably goes back to cooperation and altruism (unselfishness).
 - Cooperation: human beings acting together in achieving common goals. E.g. barter → money
 - Altruism: provides a benefit to another without expecting any immediate payment or compensation (unconditional)
- The psychological explanation of politeness: face
 - Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) : psychological notion of *face*.
 - Positive face: preserving self-image or “personality” (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved on)
 - Negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to distraction, i.e.; freedom of action and freedom of imposition.
- Leech definition of face
 - Negative face goal: the goal of avoiding loss of face. (Loss of face is a lowering of that self-esteem, as a result of the lowering of that person’s estimation in the eyes of others)
 - Positive face goal: the goal of gaining or enhancing face (i.e. The heightening or maintaining of a person’s self-esteem, as a result of the heightening or maintaining of that’s a person estimation in the eyes of others)

The language choice in politeness is an example of the pragmatic usage where the parameters of politeness phenomena are determined by power-distance relationship among the participants and the extent to which a speaker imposes on or requires something to the addressee.

Face

Face represents the self-esteem. So, when people feel his face is threatened, other people are supposed to make him feel good. Then, when we see other people seem to lose face, the other may make a joke in order to minimize the extent to which he lost face. In brief, face matters. Considerate people take into account the addressee's need to be regarded and their right not to be humiliated.

The Effects of Politeness

Polite utterances encode the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, so, it affects differently to each person. People tend to make decisions about what should they say in order to meet other preferences. The way we say things to each other has real effect.

Redress and Redundancy

Unlike presupposition which encourage economical communication by allowing shared common ground without being stated, politeness use more extensive utterances. The more economical the utterance is, the more economical utterances are used when the speaker knows the addressee well. The more elaborate when the speakers know the addressee less well. Extra language use as a kind of redress for the imposition. We tend to use repressive and less economical linguistic formulas when we place the demands of those we address and especially when we don't know them well.

Example:

You couldn't let me have a bit of paper by any change could you (to someone we don't know)

Give me a sheet of paper fathead (to our brother)

Power, Distance, and Imposition

In deciding on the regressive language needed when performing a speech act, we take into account the degree of imposition of what we seek to accomplish by our utterance and any social distance or power differential between ourselves and those we address.

Brown and Levinson (B & L) Theory

Face wants and Face-Threatening Acts

"Face" a property that all human beings have and that is broadly comparable with self-esteem. So when we perform such actions, they're typically accompanied by regressive language designed to compensate the threat to face and thus to satisfy the face wants of our interlocutors. Two kinds of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face is a person's wish to be well thought of. The desire to have others admire what we value, the desire to be understood by others, and the desire to be treated well. Meanwhile, negative face refers to the wish not to be imposed on by others and to be allowed to go about our business impeded and without rights to free and self-determined action intact.

Positive, Negative, and Off-Record Politeness

- Do the act on record: without attempting to hide what we are doing
 - Baldly without redress : *give me a pen!*
 - With positive politeness redress: *how about letting me use your pen?*

- With negative politeness redress: *could you lend me a pen?*
- Do the act off the record: in such a way as to pretend to hide it: *I forgot my pen.*
- Do not do the act at all: where the face threat is too great to be redressed by any language formula: *say nothing but search in the bag.*

Social Distance (D) + Power Differential (P) + Ratio of Imposition (R) = Degree of face threat to be redressed by appropriate linguistics strategy.

The speaker will only use the highly ranked strategy where the face threat is felt to be high, since to be “too polite” implies that one is asking a lot of someone and/or that there’s a significant power or social distance differential between those involved.

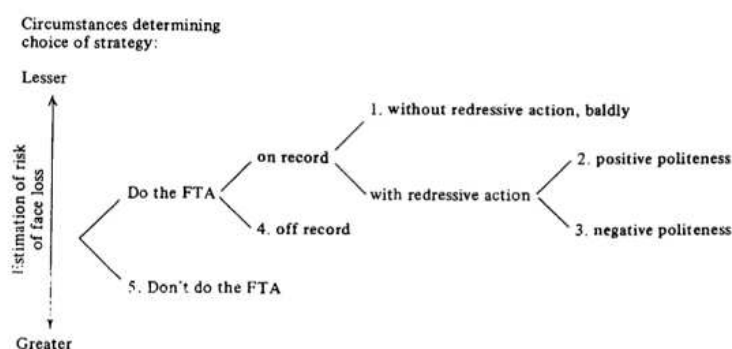


Figure 1

Positive and Negative Politeness Strategy

Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness
Notice/ attend to hearer's wants Exaggerate interest/ approval Intensify interest Use in-group identity markers Seek agreement Avoid disagreement Presuppose/ assert common ground Joke Assert knowledge of hearer's wants Offer, promise Be optimistic Include speaker and hearer in the activity Give (or ask for) reasons Assume/ assert reciprocity Give gift to hearer (goods, sympathy, etc.)	Be conventionally indirect Question, hedge Be pessimistic Minimize imposition Give deference Apologize Impersonalize State the imposition as a general rule Nominalize Go on record as incurring a debt

Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that there are three social determinants the people evaluate when choosing the politeness strategies so as to hinder the threat to face. The three parameters are Power (P), Distance (D) and Rating of imposition (R). The former two are examined in this study. The combination of these three values will indicate the importance of the FTAs, which in succession have an impact on the strategy which is employed by the speaker/sender. In light of an FTA request, in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, the speaker/sender has as previously mentioned four odds. We can glean from these that the more commanding the requests are, the more tactics the speaker/sender will

employ, with the purpose of mitigating the face threat.

Email

Computer-mediated communication is a type of text-based communication that gains remarkable momentum throughout the last decades and has become an integral part of the development and continuation of interpersonal relationships among many groups of people, including employees. The way, in which we communicate in recent decades, has had an effect on all aspects of everyday life, including our working life. New communication technologies have been established in the workplace over the past few years such as instant messaging, electronic messages, video conferencing, management information system, voice mail, facsimile (fax), the Internet, as well as the World Wide Web, and have influenced communication in organizations (Miller, 2009). Via all these technological advances people from all around the world can now communicate effectively and exchange ideas within a split second. This type of communication is termed computer-mediated communication.

EFL Learner

According to one estimate, there are about a billion people in the world today learning English as a foreign language. Besides, the number of individuals who are learning foreign languages other than English such as French, Italian, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, etc are also engaged in the process of foreign-language learning. Moreover, each individual always has his/her own characteristics to learn its language. As the term suggests, individual differences are characteristics or traits in respect of which individuals may be shown to differ from each other. But what exactly are the factors/variables that make the difference?

According to Johnson (2001), the variables that contribute to individual differences are usually divided into three broad categories. Some are called *cognitive*, meaning that they relate to the mental makeup of the person. Intelligence is one such factor; another is language aptitude, the phrase used to refer to an ability specific to language learning and different from general intelligence. Other variables are called *effective*, meaning 'related to the feelings'. The most commonly studied affective variables are motivation and attitudes. The third set of factors we shall look at are *the personality variables*, the one that springs most readily to mind is 'extroversion/introversion'.

The Cognitive Variables

Intelligence

Earlier in the century, intelligence was considered an important factor in FL learning. It was believed that a certain degree of intelligence was useful. This was a reason why learning foreign languages were often left until university level so that only the most intelligent would take it on. It was also a common belief that FL learning actually helped to develop the intelligence.

Furthermore, one Canadian researcher, Genesee (1976), attempted to correlate French achievement with intelligence, using statistics to find out whether being 'good at French' was related to 'being intelligent' (and whether 'bad at French' correlates with 'not-so-intelligent'). He finds no relationship between intelligence and what he calls 'communication skills' (speaking and listening), but he does find a correlation between intelligence and what he calls 'academic language skills' (reading and writing). This suggests that being intelligent will help you to learn reading and writing, but not speaking and listening, so it depends on which language skills you are talking about.

Aptitude

According to Carroll (in Johnson, 2001, p.123), language aptitude is ‘the rate at which persons at the secondary school, university and adult level [will] successfully master a foreign language’. Moreover, one of the big aptitude tests, developed by Carroll and Sapon (1959) was called the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT). It has five subtests; number learning, phonetic script, spelling clues, words in sentences, and paired associates. So, they drew up a long list of factors which they thought might be related to language aptitude. Then, over time, they undertook research to see which of these factors actually correlated with actual language-learning performance.

The Affective Variables

Motivation

There is two kinds of motivational studies, integrative and instrumental motivation. Someone who is ‘interactively motivated’ if they are learning the foreign language through a desire to learn more about a culture, its language, and people – to ‘integrate’ more within the target-language society. Instrumental motivation involves learning in order to achieve some other goal. Moreover, Burstall (in Johnson, 2001, p. 132) found consistently more integrative motivation in girls. One reason perhaps is that girls appear more confident of parental support for language learning. Whatever, the rights and wrongs of the matter, some parents seem to regard learning languages as suitable for girls, while the boys are encouraged in the direction of subjects (like electronics and mechanics perhaps) which some might regard as more ‘macho’.

Attitude

There are various sorts of attitude which may be relevant to language learning. By far the most studied is an attitude towards the target-language speakers, sometimes called the reference or aspirational group. In addition, learner level is likely to be one factor governing how important this type of attitude might be. It is possible that at the advanced level attitude towards reference group will be more important than lower down. Geographical setting is almost certainly another important factor.

There are some other attitude types in relation to language learning; attitude towards success, teacher, and our own country. Attitude towards success is the degree to which a student strives for accomplishing goals in life. It may be that people tend to divide themselves into high achievers and low achievers in general. Moreover, the attitude towards a teacher is a common belief that you will not learn the language if you dislike the language teacher. And the last is the attitude towards our own country will influence how well we succeed in the FL based on a feeling of ‘ethnocentrism’.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study is descriptive qualitative. It is conducted in the actual setting of the phenomenon (Hamied, 2017). However, the objectives of this study are not intended to make generalizations among all students who already sent their email to the lecturer. In other words, present findings and interpretations were not about to represent a whole value or related activities have taken later in other circumstances could possibly lead to the emergence of new different perspectives (Sugiyono, 2013).

Data Collection

Research Subjects

The subjects of the research are English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students, especially for speaking class C, reading class A and listening class B at one of the private universities in Malang, East Java. Particularly, the subjects are purposefully chosen because it helps the researcher in finding out intended findings of this study as Creswell (2012) suggests that in a descriptive qualitative study, the respondents refer to the researcher's intention to select participants and sites to understand the central phenomena. The rationale for the site selection is because the easy accessibility to get the information.

Instrumentation

The research instrument employed in the present study was documented. The documents that I used in this study was students' emails which was already sent to the lecturer for collecting their assignment.

Procedure

The steps to collect the data are as follows.

- The research subjects were determined by using purposive sampling.
- The email documents were collected from four lecturers.
- The email documents were analyzed by Brown and Levinson's theory
- The email documents were screen captured to be the evidence of the data

Data Analysis

The data gained were analyzed qualitatively by employing the data analysis technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) who set the analysis through three procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

- Data Reduction

The data gained from emails, documents were reduced by selecting and classifying the politeness strategies regarding Brown and Levinson's theory.

- Data display

After classifying the points relates to Brown and Levinson's theory, the data were analyzed and described clearly.

- Conclusion drawing/data verification

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overall Results of the Documentation

Since this study employed descriptive qualitative design, the results were interpreted by calculating the mean (in %) of each component. Then, to answer the first question, the percentage was summed up and divided by two to get the mean of each scale, while the mean of each scale indicates how many students belong to positive and negative politeness.

Generally, there were two points in politeness; those are positive politeness and negative politeness. Based on the data, there were 50 emails that were analyzed to find how students' politeness through emails while they collect the assignment for their lecturer. The result indicated that 60% of them used positive politeness while sending their assignment to their lecturer. It was about 30 emails which wrote sorry and thanks to the lecturer like the following example.

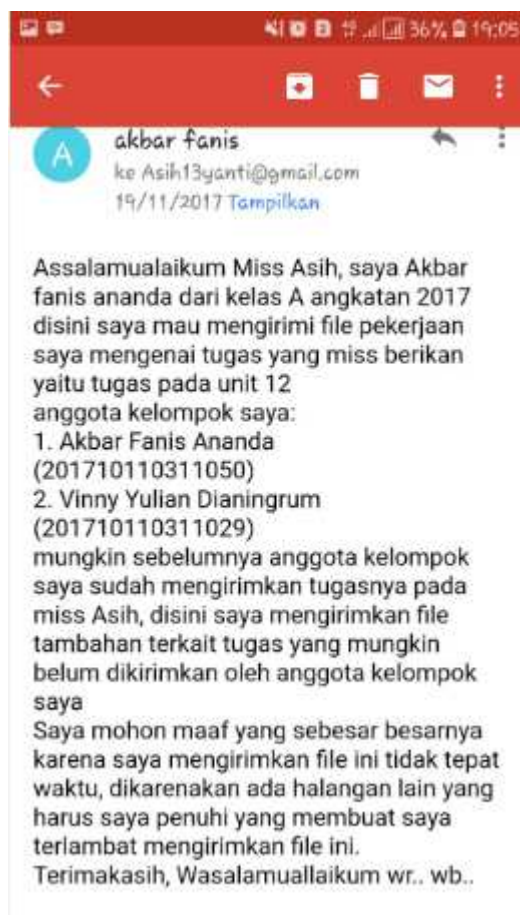


Figure 2

From above example, the students wrote a greeting in the opening of the email then explained what his imposition to the hearer's wants by saying that he asked an apologize that he was late to send the email to the lecturer because of other agreements.

The second criteria of politeness were negative politeness which the student's emails would minimize their imposition for their lecturer. They directly attached the assignment file without the doubt and did not give any opening words to bridge what the students want for the lecturer. It was about 40 % of them which used negative politeness in responding the lecturer wants in collecting the assignment through email like the following example.

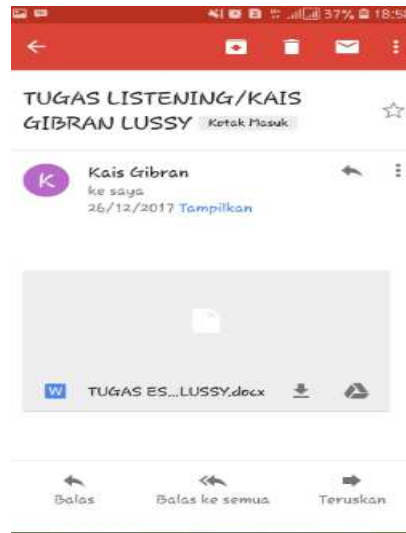


Figure 3

From the example above, the student just wrote name and stated what assignment to be attached without giving any opening words to the lecturer. He tried to not impose the lecturer by choosing using negative politeness.

The Results across Brown and Levinson's Theory

Do the Face Threatening Act (FTA)

- On record baldly

In this stage, this was done in the most definite way, without attention to the social aspect and realized often times by imperatives. Brown and Levinson (1987) postulate that, that sort of strategy was typically employed in cases of emergency or propositions that need trivial sacrifices for the sake of the receiver.

From the data, there were some students chose to use to record baldly while sending an email to their lecturers. It was about 20% of students indicates this stage such as the following example.



Figure 4

That example told that the student directly needs her lecturer's attention to reply her email by writing 'to long di - balas ya'.

- **On Record with Positive Politeness**

This point highlighted that this kind of politeness would ‘give face’ to the hearer by exhibiting solidarity with them. The individual sought to lessen the threat to the receiver’s face, thus desires would not to threaten the receiver’s face.

From the data, most students apply this point to deliver their impositions to the lecturer in the term of sending the classroom assignment. There were 40 % of them gave their face to their lecturer such as the example below.

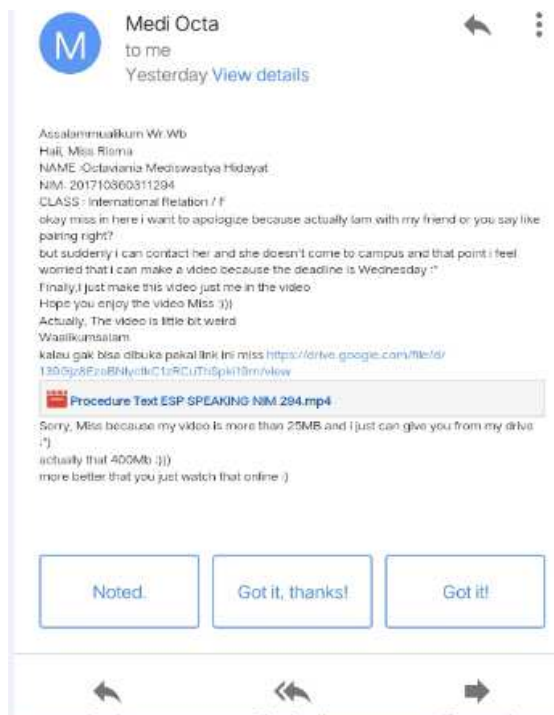


Figure 5

The example above indicated the student to use positive politeness because he gave his face to the lecturer by writing “I want to apologize because actually I am with my friend or you say like pairing right?”.

- **On the record with negative politeness**

In this stage, the sender employed negative redressive action. This strategy took into consideration the hearer’s or in this case receiver’s desire not to be imposed upon. It was the most elaborated and conventionalized form of strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Indirectness was mainly associated with negative politeness strategies and indirect requests.

From the data, some students chose to apply this stage in delivering their emails by not to impose their lecturer while they read their email like the following example.

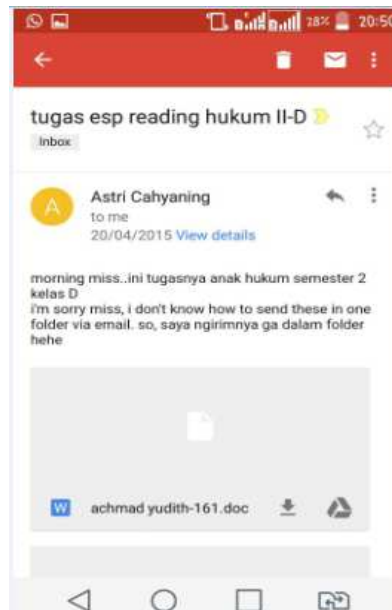


Figure 6

The example above, it implied that the students even though she did a mistake, she wanted to say that she already tried her best when she asked the lecturer to still gave her a good score.

- **Off record**

In this stage, it was used when the speaker/sender acknowledged the risk of FTA to be too serious and chose to say or do nothing, in order to prevent face loss. From the data, some students also chose this stage to show how they actually wanted for their lecturer. 32% of students just wrote their name, student number and give the subject of the email when they sent their assignment to the lecturer such as the following example.

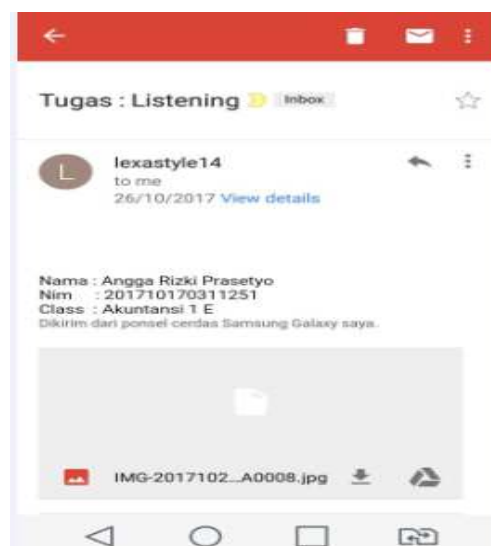


Figure 6

Don't do the FTA

In this stage, some data found that students chose not to show their face anymore by only giving their name and only student's number without any email subjects. It could be concluded that students believed to their lecturer and they already did their best in doing their assignment and delivered it to their lecturer like the example below.

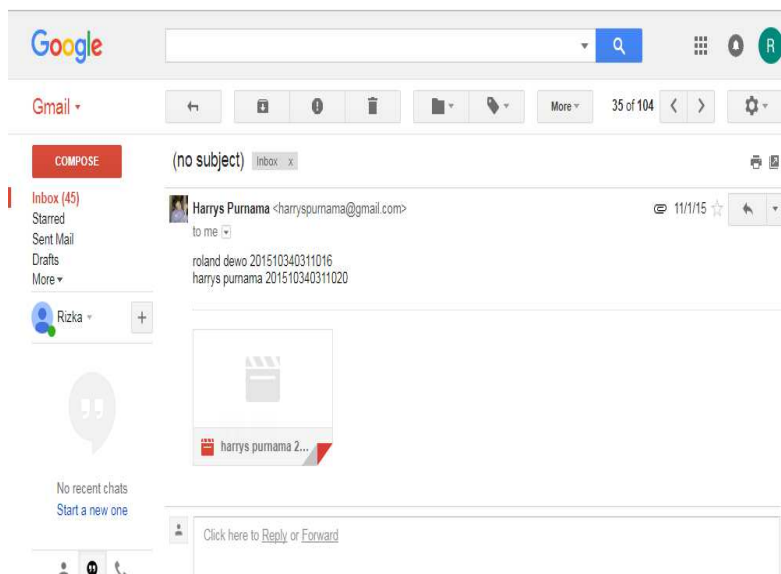


Figure 7

Reflecting on the findings above, students have different stages about the politeness strategies. Most students choose to do the act on record with positive politeness rather than other stages. It was almost 50% of students applied it when they send their email to their lecturer. The different of students politeness is regarding three points; those are social distance, power differential and the ratio of imposition. In addition, individual differences in English as a foreign language could affect the student's intention why they use such kind of politeness strategies while they send an email to the lecturer.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study suggests that Indonesian EFL learners tend to do the act on record with politeness strategies and some of them also choose not to do the act because they do not want to lose their face. Politeness strategy becomes the most used by the Indonesian EFL learners when they deliver their email to their lecturer. The implication for the future research is from this study, the lecturer can give knowledge to their students how to deliver a good email for showing politeness to other people.

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